

The Corn Belt Route: a History of the Chicago Great Western Railroad Company

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calls forth similar reservations. It is a weak treatment of the context in which MacMillan rose to prominence. It reiterates the familiar assertions of earlier, inferior popular histories, skims over crucial issues of forest policy and timberland speculation, and contains a number of errors (e.g. "Mossan" for Mossom Boyd). Future historians of the British Columbia forest industry must do better than this. Overall, *Empire of Wood* suffers, even as a popular history, from a lack of thematic unity and interpretive bite. It has no story to tell other than the story of corporate development and much of this is conveyed in surprisingly ponderous prose. Yet by Canadian standards *Empire of Wood* is a "best seller" of sorts. With over nine thousand hardback copies in print, a paperbound edition of the book is soon to appear. I wonder why.

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The Corn Belt Route: A History of the Chicago Great Western Railroad Company, by H. Roger Grant. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984. xi, 231 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.00 cloth.

My warm and vivid recollections of the Chicago Great Western Railroad (CGW) begin during the age of steam and pass with the railroad itself during the time of the diesel. Two are representative: the afternoon passenger train to Omaha hurtling down the track west of Moorland—tender swaying, cars rocking, and the entire steel missile enveloped in smoke and dust—and Engineer Fuller who, while his train was being "worked" at the Fort Dodge passenger depot, patiently fielded questions about railroading and delivered various time tables to this preadolescent interrogator. One recollection memorializes CGW's train service and the other the cheery friendliness of its employees.

The Great Western was the brain child of Alpheus B. Stickney, a curious and independent-minded entrepreneur who drove a CGW predecessor into Iowa from the North, acquired various other rights and properties, added more construction, and in 1888 had a line in place between St. Paul and Chicago via Oelwein and Dubuque. A year earlier Stickney had purchased and extended yet another property to give him a diverging line from Oelwein to Kansas City. He did not rest. More track linked Mason City with Fort Dodge and then Council Bluffs and Omaha as well as Oelwein and Clarion. A series of branches and secondary main lines in Minnesota served Mankato, Red Wing, Winona, and Rochester. CGW's bread-and-butter routes

were those linking Chicago and the Twin Cities; Chicago and Omaha; and the Twin Cities and Kansas City. Oelwein was the hub of operations, the location of the company's main shops, and later its headquarters.

Compared to the railroad giants with which it had to compete, the CGW seemed an undernourished ragamuffin. Indeed, Iowans and others constantly confused the Great Western with the rival and much larger Chicago & North Western (C&NW) consequently, the CGW was forced to innovate—with rates, service, and even motive power. The road was, for instance, an industry leader in the movement of trailers-on-flatcars and it was an early convert to diesels. The quality of its management generally was good although an unfortunate scandal marred its reputation at midlife. By 1960 a new era of mergers had begun within the railroad industry; it was only a matter of time before the CGW would be involved. So it was. The road became part of the Chicago & North Western on July 1, 1968. Precious little of it remains in service today.

The fact that most of it has been abandoned is not evidence that the CGW should never have been born. The company did much to develop its five-state service area and faithfully served its patrons for nearly a century. H. Roger Grant compellingly demonstrates this in *The Corn Belt Route*. Grant's great handicap in preparing the account was the absence of adequate primary sources. The State Historical Society of Iowa in 1968 took no interest in the records of the Great Western, although it was the only Class-1 carrier based in the state, and the C&NW saved only the barest minimum for its own purposes. The book's endnotes attest to Grant's tenacity in rooting out every conceivable secondary source as well as his skill in weaving oral history into a complete manuscript. The book is well written and handsomely designed on an unusual 8½x9½ inch format.

Most important, *The Corn Belt Route* is a credit to the company whose history it chronicles, to the memory of those Great Western trains that today roll along only in the recesses of the mind, and to Engineer Fuller and all his kith and kin. It will be of special interest to those concerned with the history of business, railroads, Iowa, and the upper Midwest; it will also attract the general reader.

SOUTHERN PACIFIC TRANSPORTATION COMPANY DON L. HOFSSOMMER

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